



Op-Ed: What Our Civilian Leaders Do Not Understand About the Ethic of Military Professions: A Striking Example of the Current Gap in Civil-Military Relations

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Over the past couple of months we have seen a clear example of just how wide the gap currently is between the understandings of senior civilian and military leaders within the Department of Defense. Now that the episode has been resolved, or at least ended, a review can be educational.

By a Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) memorandum quoted in part below, the Department of Defense (DoD) announced on August 13th a new policy granting homosexual Soldiers¹ non-chargeable leave for the purpose of traveling to another state to marry:²

... We recognize that same-sex couples not stationed in a jurisdiction that permits same-sex marriage would have to travel to another jurisdiction to marry. Accordingly, the Department will implement policies to allow military personnel in such a relationship non-chargeable leave for the purpose of traveling to a jurisdiction where such marriage can occur. This will provide accelerated access to the full range of benefits to married couples throughout the Department and help level the playing field between opposite-sex and same-sex couples seeking to be married. ...

Then in the very next paragraph, the directive contradicted itself in a remarkable way:

The Department of Defense remains committed to ensuring that all men and women who serve our

country and their families are treated fairly and equally. Expeditious implementation of the decisions announced in this memorandum will help the Department remain true to that commitment.

Note that this policy singled out homosexual Soldiers for privileges not available to others who may desire non-chargeable leave for what are equally valid reasons. For example, a heterosexual soldier whose intended spouse lives several states away would quite understandably wish to marry near her/his home. This establishment of the new benefit for a single category of Soldiers demonstrated a remarkable ignorance of how military professions use their Ethic as the central means of social control for the motivation and behavior of both their institution and its individual practitioners.

Fortunately, several members of the Congress intervened sufficiently that the Secretary, after a hurried meeting with service secretaries, chiefs, and the chairman, quickly dropped the idea of a special leave for a select group and substituted instead the use of administrative absences that were already available, based on merit, for all servicemen and women.³ In the end, then, both homosexual and heterosexual Soldiers are now being treated the same, even when not similarly situated (because not all states allow gay marriages).

In the context of civil-military relations, it is important now to highlight and reaffirm essential understandings about military professions and their Ethics—understandings that our civilian leaders clearly missed. Specifically, why was the initial policy in gross violation of military ethics and thus highly likely to have deleterious effects on the future effectiveness of our Armed Forces?

First, it violated the meritocratic core of the Ethic of military professions. It is well-documented that a core value in the Ethic of all military professions is that of merit, that any and all Soldiers will receive only that which they merit by their individual competence, character, and commitment.⁴ For example, in the case of promotions or advancement, every Soldier, regardless of rank, must believe the results of the promotion board were fair, that all selected in fact fully merited the advancement, and that those who were not selected, including him/herself as the case may be, were denied advancement solely on the basis of individual merit with no hint of partiality to other persons or groups. Further, the same absolute impartiality is expected by Soldiers for all other benefits, including time for personal leave (which all Soldiers accrue on a fully paid basis of 30 days annually—a most generous benefit, indeed, when compared to most in the civilian society they are defending).

Second, such violations of the principles of impartiality and meritocracy embedded within military ethics erode interpersonal cohesion (trust relationships) essential internally to effective military units. As two faculty at the U.S. Army War College have recently noted:

At the organizational level, researchers have categorized trust as behavioral (predictive), cognitive-based (perceptions), or affect-based (feelings). . . . [W]e offer four components of trust that reflect the behavioral, cognitive, and affective nature of trust: credibility of competence; benevolence of motives; integrity with sense of fairness and honesty; and, predictability of behavior. . . . [V]iolations of these conditions may lead to a lack of trust or, more destructively, a sense of distrust.⁵

I conclude that all four components of trust—credibility of competence of the DoD policymakers, the benevolence of their motives, the integrity of the policy's fairness, and the now (un)predictability of future such policies—were violated by this unfortunate and unnecessary policy. It was apparently lost on the policymakers that their own working group to design implementation for the repeal of DADT, a distinguished panel led by Honorable Jeh Johnson and General F. Carter Ham, had in 2010 specifically and strongly recommended against creating such conditions of "special treatment" for homosexual service members, commenting that ". . . we believe that they will be accepted more readily if the military understands that they are simply being permitted equal footing with everyone else."⁶

Third, the establishment of a special benefit more broadly erodes the trust that all uniformed Soldiers may have in senior civilian and military leaders of the profession in which they serve. Trust between senior leaders and junior professionals is something that has to be earned in a profession (unlike within a bureaucracy), and that is not easy, given the difference in responsibility and organizational perspective held by each group. This is simply a constant challenge for leaders at the strategic level, and recent research shows that in the Army profession, at least, such trust has been eroded during the decade plus of deployments and war.⁷ This is particularly so between senior civilian leaders and junior military professionals. The initial policy certainly did nothing to help restore that essential trust.

True, a meritocratic Ethic and culture is the ideal, and true, the armed services have in the past bent the norm for the purposes of supporting specific, narrowly directed affirmative actions. But that is not the case here as homosexuals are not now, and according to the Johnson-Ham report should not become, a special category under the intents of equal opportunity policies. Thus, one can hardly imagine a more deleterious attack on the core of the professions' Ethic than to privilege

one group over all others by granting a new benefit to just that group of Soldiers.

Interestingly, the principle objection raised in Congress was the same as discussed above, “. . . this change in policy will create disparate treatment between same-sex and opposite-sex couples . . . contrary to the Department’s stated policy.”⁸ Perhaps the swift resolution of this issue between DoD and the Congress will also contribute to improved understandings of the impartial and meritocratic Ethic at the core of our military professions.

ENDNOTES

1. Soldier is used throughout to refer to all uniformed members of the Department of Defense, regardless of service or rank.

2. Secretary of Defense Memorandum, Subject: Extending Benefits to the Same-Sex Spouses of Military Members, dated August 13, 2013 available from www.army.mil/article/109347/New_policy_change_benefits_same_sex_spouses/.

3. For a short recounting of what happened, see the testimony of Acting Under Secretary Jessica Wright in response to a question by Senator James Inhofe (R-OK), testimony transcript, “Hearing to Consider the Nominations of Honorable Deborah Lee. . .,” Washington, DC: U.S. Senate, Committee on Armed Services, September 19, 2013, pp. 18-19.

4. See Army Doctrine Reference Publication, ADRP1, *The Army Profession*, Washington, Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 2013, para 2-14, p. 2-4, and para 3-17, p. 3-4; and Thomas Boccardi, “Meritocracy in the Profession of Arms,” *Military Review*, January-February 2013, pp. 17-23.

5. See Charles Allen and William Braun, “Trust: Implications for the Army Profession,” *Military Review*, October-November 2013, pp. 73-85.

6. Jeh Johnson and F. Carter Ham, “Report of the Comprehensive Review of the Issues Associated with a Repeal of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’,” p. 14, available from [www.defense.gov/home/features/2010/0610_dadt/DADTReport_FINAL_20101130\(secure-hires\).pdf](http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2010/0610_dadt/DADTReport_FINAL_20101130(secure-hires).pdf).

7. See Charles Allen, “Assessing the Army Profession,” *Parameters*, Autumn 2011, pp. 73-86; Joshua Glonek, “The Trust Lapse,” *Parameters*, September-October 2013, pp. 40-47; and John Vermeesch, “Trust Erosion and Identity Corrosion: Threat to the Army Professions,” *Military Review*, October-November 2013, pp. 2-11.

8. Tom Philpott, "Gay Marriage 'Leave' May Soon Be 'Administrative Absence'," Hanford (CA) *Sentinel*, August 31, 2013, available from <http://ebird.osd.mil/ebfiles/e20130831929784.html>.

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